

MIDDLE ENGLISH \bar{e} -RAISING:
A PRELUDE TO THE GREAT VOWEL SHIFT

JERZY WELNA

University of Warsaw

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses the early *i*-*y*-spellings which may indicate the narrowing of the long mid close vowel [e: > i:] even before the 15th century, a date generally considered the initial stage of the Great Vowel Shift. The change, especially found before [r], with only a few examples in other contexts, shows a pattern typical of lexical diffusion. As regards regional distribution, the early raising was in all probability initiated in the non-Western areas of England, most of the relevant evidence coming from Eastern and Northern dialects.

1. Early \bar{e} -raisings in English

It is common knowledge that the raising of the long mid-front vowel [e:] to [i:], as in *green*, *meet*, *tree*, etc., is part of a sequence of changes known as the Great Vowel Shift. According to Jordan's (1925 [1974]) and Luick's (1940) classic studies of English phonology, \bar{e} - and \bar{o} -raising as well as the remaining three changes (\bar{a} -raising, \bar{i} -/ \bar{u} -diphthongisation) took place in the 15th century. However, from the very beginning such dating has been contested by historical linguists who adduced instances of spellings indicating a raised pronunciation of the vowel. Especially frequent proved to be *i*-spellings for the earlier *e*-spellings reflecting long close [e:]. For example, in Layamon's *Brut* (c. 1200; MS Cott. Calig. A ix) one can find forms like *spiche* (OE *sp(r)ēche* 'speech') or *sichinde* (present participle of OE *sēcan* 'seek'). It is even more surprising that the spelling *-hydan* for *-hēdan* 'heed' occurs as early as Old English (a metrical paraphrase of Psalm LV (LVI), v. 6 (7); cf. Malone 1930).

Quite numerous are forms with the early narrowing in *Sir Ferumbras*, a metrical romance representing the Southwestern dialect of Devonshire (1380; MS Ashmole 33, Bodleian Library). Among others, the text contains rhymes

like *me* : *compane*, with a reverse spelling which may testify to the raising of the long close vowel [e:]. On the other hand, the early rhymes adduced in Prins's (1942a, 1942b) two well-known articles cannot be treated as the evidence of early narrowing because of the writer's improper interpretation of the spelling evidence (cf. Ikegami 1997).

However, other Old English forms reflecting \bar{e} -raising are quite numerous. It is sufficient to quote *fy*t (OE *fēt*; Cart. Sax. II 134, 27), *hir* (OE *hēr*; *Lindisfarne Gosp.*, *Mark*), *slypton* (preterite plural of *slēpan* 'sleep'; *Psalm LXXV*, 6) or *scip* (OE *scēp* 'sheep'; *Lindisfarne Gosp.*, *Matth.* 12, 12). All these instances testify to an Old English and Early Middle English tendency to raise long close [e:]. But Malone (1930) rejects a hypothesis of the early occurrence of the Great Vowel Shift, stating that occasional early \bar{i} -forms should be explained not "as anticipations of the vowel-shift of the fifteenth century, but as survivals of a pronunciation which was more or less current in OE."

Another type of \bar{e} -raising can be identified in Southeastern England, i.e. in Kent, where forms like *byep* (3sg present of OE *bēop* 'be'), *dyevel* (OE *dēofol* 'devil') were standard spellings. However, such spellings seem to have represented long close [e:] rather than long [i:], if not diphthongs, and their interpretation remains an open issue.

The author of the present study does not consider the above examples as illustrations of the initial stage of the Great Vowel Shift simply because the effects of these changes were short-lived. None of the words with spellings modified to <i/y> managed to survive into Late Middle English, and none of them participated in the 15th century diphthongization [i:] > [ii], a part of the Great Vowel Shift.

2. The study

The corpus of the present study only includes instances of long close [e:] in words where the vowel was raised to [i:] early enough to take part in the diphthongisation to [ii]. The data which come from the *OED* and the *MED* include the following items:

- 1) (a) *acquire* (OF *acquerre*), *choir/quire* (OF *quer*), *entire* (AN *enter*), *friar* (OF *frère*), *inquire/enquire* 'inquiry' (OF *enquerre*), *quire* (OF *quaer*), *require* (OF *requer-*), *squire* (OF *esquier*), (n)*umpire* (OF *noumper*), *brier/briar* (OE A *brēr*);
- (b) *aisle* (OF *ele*), *contrive* (OF *contreuve*), *die* (Pl. *dice*) (OF *dé*, Pl. *dés*);

Because the verb *tire* (OE *teorian*) had an Old English variant with long [i:] we cannot be sure whether Middle English *i*-forms of the verb reflect that variant with \bar{e} -raising or whether they are continuations of the original [i:]. Consequently, the verb is not included in the statistics.

The available literature devotes some, although limited, space to the description of the change. For instance, Wright and Wright (1924: 80) believe that the early \bar{e} -raising in two English words (*briar*, *tire*) and in the loanwords *friar*, *quire*, *umpire* (ME *noumper*) occurred "in the early part of the fifteenth century", while *acquire*, *inquire*, *require* are said to have obtained long [i:] due to the influence of the corresponding Latin source words with long [i:] in the root. In one word (ME *contrive*) long [i:] developed in the context of the preceding liquid [r]. But although the raising is most frequent before [r], one must agree with Dobson (1968: 655) who rejects the hypothesis of that change being combinative. The narrowed vowel may have originated in dialects where ME [ɛ:] "tended to be raised to \bar{e} , and would then be due to an unconscious attempt to preserve the distinction" between ME [ɛ:] and ME [i:] even at the cost of losing the distinction between ME [e:] and ME [i:]. Finally, Luick's (1940: 557-559) dating the change in the plural *dice* a century earlier than the change in the remaining items is not supported by any convincing data.

The treatment of \bar{e} -raising as originating in the Southeast (Flasdieck 1924) is not fully compatible with Dobson's hypothesis of the process being an East and Northern development; cf. the poems *King Alisaunder* (Essex, 14c), *Gamelyn* (East Midland, 14c) and *Paston Letters* (East Midland, 15c), as well as *York Plays* (North, 15c). Curiously, Flasdieck (1924) claims that such raising was confined to parts of the Southeast ("in Teilen des südöstlichen England"), i.e. Kent. However, there is only scant evidence of such a process in Kent, a dialect whose impact on the remaining regional variants was negligible.

Dobson's (1968: 656) explanation of the narrowing of long close [e:] is determined sociolinguistically as he maintained that the new raised pronunciation reflected a conscious effort of the educated speakers of English to render French very tense long close [e:], the result being an *i*-like vowel in that set of words. Ingenious as it is, this explanation does not make it clear why other words with French [e:] failed to become raised to approximate long [i:]. Luick's examples include rather late forms, such as *contrive* (*York Plays*) and *fryers* 'friars' (*Paston Letters*), both from the late 14th or the 15th century.

To move beyond Middle English, the raised vowel in the items in (1) is reflected in Shakespeare's rhymes like *live* : *contrive* (*Julius Caesar* 2.3.15-16), *survive* : *contrive* (*The Rape of Lucrece* 204-206), *dice* : *nice* (*Love's Labour's Lost* 5.2.232-233, 325-326). However, the failure of narrowing is still reflected in Shakespeare's spellings like *umper* (*Henry the Sixth*, 1, 4.1.51) and *umpeere* (*Romeo and Juliet* 4.1.63), where the spelling <e(e)> must have corresponded to long close [e:] (cf. Cercignani 1981: 256-257).

3. Early *e*-raising: The time dimension

The earliest evidence of \bar{e} -raising is an isolated form of the verb *tire* found in the *Corpus Glossary* (8th century; c725); cf.:

- 2) c725 *Corpus Gloss.* (O.E.T.) 668 *Desisse*, **tiorade**
[c1200 *Trin. Coll. Hom.* 29 Vnwreste þu best 3ef þu wreche ne secst.. 3ief mihte þe ne **atiereð**.]

For reasons presented above, the Old Mercian form of the verb *tire*, with <io> in the *Corpus Glossary* (amended c1050 to *teorode* in Wr.-Wülcker 385/9), and a Middle English form *atiereð* in the *Trinity College Homilies* do not seem to be reliable as they may have represented a variant with [i:]. The list in (3) below contains instances of the earliest forms with \bar{e} -raising, followed by the date, source, Middle English forms of the word, the county and dialect:

3)

[tire	c725/c1200	<i>Corpus Glossary</i>	<i>tiorade</i>	Mercia]
		<i>Trin. Coll. Hom.</i> 29	<i>atiereð</i>	Huntington (cEM)
squire	c1290	<i>Beket</i> 2427 (<i>S. Eng. Leg.</i> 176)	<i>squiers</i>	Gloucestershire (wSW)
dice	c1300	<i>King Alisaunder</i> 3297	<i>dys</i>	Shropshire (wWM)
require	c1340	<i>Gaw. & Gr. Knt.</i> 1056	<i>require</i>	Lancashire (nWM)
friar	c1370	Wyclif <i>Agst. Begg.</i> Friars (1608) 30	<i>friars</i>	Oxfordshire (nSW)
inquire	c1380	Wyclif <i>Wks.</i> (1880) 278	<i>enquyred</i>	Oxfordshire (nSW)
contrive	1393	<i>Gower Conf.</i> III. 90	<i>contrive</i>	London (sEM)
umpire	1424	<i>Paston Lett.</i> I. 14	<i>nounpier</i>	Norfolk (eEM)
aisle	1428	<i>R. Test. Eb.</i> II. 665	<i>yle</i>	Yorkshire (N)
brier	c1430	<i>Lydgate Min. Poems</i> (Percy Soc.) 114	<i>bryer</i>	London (sEM)
choir/quire	1480	Caxton <i>Chron. Eng.</i> ccli. 322 <i>Catholicon Angl</i>	<i>quyre</i>	London (sEM)
entire	1483	Caxton <i>Cato</i> I j	<i>entyrly</i>	
acquire	1483	<i>Naval Acc. Hen. VII</i> 128, j	<i>acquyre</i>	London (sEM)
quire	1497	<i>reame & vij</i>	<i>quires</i>	

The above listing may help reveal several interesting facts. First of all it can be shown that \bar{e} -raising evidently took place in the 14th century at the latest because roughly one half of the above words exhibit the close vowel [i:] before the year

1400. Second, the distribution of spellings in time offers a characteristic pattern of lexical diffusion where words affected earlier become the input to the Great Vowel Shift more readily than others. The chronology of the change affecting particular items presented in the comprehensive statistical list (4) is split into segments corresponding to the four crucial centuries (12th-15th centuries). Words from the *OED* are arranged chronologically according to the date of the first occurrence of a form exhibiting raising. The first number refers to forms with raising, the second, to forms without raising (the forms of *tire* are disregarded):

4)

	1101-1200	1201-1300	1301-1400	1401-1500
squire		7 : 0	11 : 1	9 : 1
dice			7 : 5	20 : 2
require			4 : 5	17 : 8
friar		0 : 4	6 : 7	4 : 7
inquire		0 : 4	0 : 4	5 : 7
contrive			3 : 14	2 : 7
umpire			0 : 2	1 : 9
aisle			0 : 2	5 : 4
brier		0 : 2	0 : 9	1 : 3
choir/quire		0 : 3	0 : 8	2 : 2
entire	0 : 1	0 : 1	0 : 1	1 : 19
acquire				4 : 2
quire		0 : 2	0 : 2	1 : 6

The above table offers satisfactory evidence concerning the emergence of forms of words with spellings indicating \bar{e} -raising. It is evident from the adduced data that the process in question must have affected first of all the noun *squire* whose forms with non-raised [e:] are practically missing, the total ratio for the whole period under investigation being 27 : 2. Also spectacular is an abrupt emergence of the numerous forms of the noun *die/dice* with the total ratio 27 : 7 in the period of two hundred years (1300-1500). Less rapid was the raising in the verb *require*, which exhibits the proportion 21 : 13. Other words, except *acquire* (with late raising; ratio 4 : 2), failed to produce more variants with raising than without raising, especially resistant to the change being the adjective *entire* with the ratio 1 : 21, which makes one wonder how the vowel in that word managed to be captured by the Great Vowel Shift diphthongization rule. It seems that such specific distribution of the change involving affected and unaffected words is yet another proof in support of the validity of the theory of lexical diffusion.

4. Early \bar{e} -raising: The space dimension

The distribution of forms with e -raising in dialects offers few surprises, but some findings may be considered interesting. Apart from Kentish, which is not discussed here for the scarcity of relevant data, the change seems to have left its imprint on all other dialects. The review begins with the presentation of forms from the North. The table contains the data reflecting the presence and absence of a raised vowel in particular words; cf.:

5)	squire	4 : 0	inquire	1 : 3	choir/quire	0 : 1
	dice	4 : 0	contrive	2 : 3	entire	0 : 1
	require	3 : 4	aisle	3 : 0	acquire	0 : 1
	friar	0 : 3	brier	0 : 3	quire	0 : 1
	Total	17 : 20				

Considering the proportion 17 : 20 it can be stated that Northern forms with and without \bar{e} -raising show a similar distribution. If the forms of *tire* are included (5 : 1) the balance would have been almost perfect. Curiously, all instances of *squire* are found in the *Cursor Mundi* (14c), which also contains single occurrences of *enquere* and *brere* with [e:] retained, while the forms with [i:] of *aisle* chiefly belong to a set of documents from Yorkshire (*yle, ile, ylle* in *Reg. Test. Ebor.* of late 14th-early 16th century). The *Poems* of a Scottish writer Dunbar's (late 15th-early 16th century) chiefly show raised forms (5 : 1). In sum, the Northern dialect can be said to have exhibited a moderate tendency towards adopting \bar{e} -raising.

The East Midland dialect shows the following distribution of forms with and without \bar{e} -raising:

6)	squire	9 : 0	inquire	3 : 9	brier	1 : 4
	dice	13 : 4	contrive	2 : 1	choir/quire	1 : 1
	require	10 : 7	umpire	1 : 4	entire	0 : 10
	friar	3 : 5	aisle	1 : 0	acquire	4 : 2
					quire	0 : 4
	Total	48 : 51				

Like in the North, the total figures relevant to the raised and the non-raised forms are roughly the same. But one cannot fail to observe a characteristic pattern of the change distribution in particular words. Thus, while nine forms of *squire* with raising are not matched by forms without raising, the opposite can be said about *entire*, whose 10 non-raised forms have no raised correspondences. Also peculiar is the distribution of \bar{e} -raising in the otherwise similarly sounded verbs *require*, *inquire* and *acquire*, of which the first and the last ex-

hibit slightly more numerous forms with raising than without it (10 : 7 and 4 : 2 respectively). In the noun *die/dice* the process of raising seems to be nearing completion.

Chaucer's forms represent both types since different manuscripts of his works show variation of raised and non-raised forms. Thus, *enquyrid* is matched by four spellings with <e> (*requered*), and so is *enquyrid*, matched by *enquire*, but *squire* is consistently spelt with <i/y>. The high frequency noun *die/dice* is spelt either <dys, dyse, dise>, with raising, or <dees, deis>, without raising.

Another eminent writer from London, Lydgate (early 15th century), seemed to have preferred forms without raising, such as *owmperis*, *requere* (3), *entiere* (4), *quayre*, the only instances with raising being single occurrences of *require* and *bryer*, while the *Paston Letters* reveal both spelling types. Caxton's forms need a special comment since the London writer shows a marked preference for [i:] in *require* (5), *acquire* (4; plus one form without raising), but for [e:] in *inquire* (2), *friar* (2) and *entire* (2). In total, his 13 forms with raising are matched by 8 forms without raising. Like Caxton's, the dialect of East Midland also shows a moderate tendency to accept raised forms.

The dialect of West Midland has the following distribution of forms:

7)	squire	2 : 1	inquire	1 : 2	brier	0 : 4
	dice	2 : 1	contrive	1 : 11	entire	0 : 3
	friar	0 : 1	umpire	0 : 2	quire	0 : 3
	Total	6 : 28				

West Midland can be definitely eliminated as a potential focal area of the change. The total low number of occurrences of *i/y*-spellings is a clear indication of the failure of \bar{e} -raising in Western England. A striking feature of the list under (7) is the high number of forms with non-raised long close [e:] in the verb *contrive* (*controve*, *contreve*, etc.). The two writers who developed fondness for that verb, Robert of Brunne (5) and William Langland (4), preferred to employ forms with the non-raised vowel.

The last region to be described is the Southwest, which has the following distribution of forms with and without raising:

8)	squire	6 : 1	friar	2 : 4	aisle	0 : 1
	dice	0 : 1	inquire	1 : 7	brier	0 : 3
	require	3 : 0	umpire	0 : 4	choir/quire	0 : 7
					entire	0 : 1
	Total	12 : 29				

If we consider the total figures related to forms with raised and non-raised [e:], Southwestern emerges as a region slow in introducing the new raised value of

the vowel in the set of words under discussion. Like in other dialects, only *squire* and perhaps *require*, accepted \bar{e} -raising, while the verb *inquire* failed to adopt \bar{e} -raising. Characteristically, only four of the above ten words demonstrate forms with the spelling <i/y>.

As regards particular authors and texts, Robert of Gloucester definitely prefers the non-raised forms (1 : 5), including *squire*, which is elsewhere spelt with <i/y>. Although the non-raised forms prevail in Wyclif (7 : 11), the number of spellings with <i/y> is relatively high in his texts, although the verb *inquire*, showing early rising elsewhere, exhibits a 1 : 3 ratio. It is worth noting that the raised vowel in *require* is recorded twice in Trevisa.

Summing up, as regards \bar{e} -raising the Southwest comes close to West Midland, which allows us to state that the change originated in the non-Western areas of England.

5. Conclusions

The evidence from the *OED* permits to formulate the following conclusions:

- 1) The raising of long close [e:] in words like *squire*, *require*, *dice*, etc discussed above began earlier than is suggested in the standard historical grammars. There is ample evidence of the process being initiated at the end of the 13th century and gathering speed in the century to follow.
- 2) The change shows a pattern typical of lexical diffusion. While many words show modified spellings with <i/y> very early, many words with \bar{e} -raising in the standard language exhibit non-raised values as late as the 16th century.
- 3) The change took place and spread first of all in the non-Western areas of England. Texts from that region show roughly the same proportion of raised and non-raised forms. Spellings from West Midland and the Southwest reflecting \bar{e} -raising are strikingly less numerous than those from the East and the North.
- 4) As regards major writers of the epoch, the most extensive evidence of \bar{e} -raising can be found in Caxton (15th century, London).

REFERENCES

- Cercignani, Fausto
1981 *Shakespeare's works and Elizabethan pronunciation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Dobson, Eric J.
1968 *English pronunciation 1500-1700*. (2nd edition). Vol. 2. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Flasdieck, Hermann M.
1924 "Ein südost-mittelenglischer Lautwandel", *Englische Studien* 58: 1-23.

- Ikegami, Masa
1997 "Rhyme evidence of the Great Vowel Shift" in *The Ashmole Sir Ferumbras* (c.1380)", *North-West Germanic Language Evolution* 30: 3-19.
- Jordan, Richard
1925/1974 *Handbook of Middle English grammar: Phonology*. [Translated and revised by Eugene J. Crook]. The Hague: Mouton.
- Luick, Karl
1940 *Historische Grammatik der englischer Sprache*. Vol. 1-2. Leipzig: Tauchnitz.
- Malone, Kemp
1930 "Old English (*ge*)*hydan* 'heed'", in: Einar Munskgaard (ed.), 45-54.
- Munskgaard, Einar (ed.)
1930 *A grammatical miscellany offered to Otto Jespersen on his 70th birthday*. Copenhagen: Allen & Unwin.
- Prins, A. A.
1942a "A few early examples of the Great Vowel Shift", *Neophilologus* 27: 134-137.
1942b "The Great Vowel Shift reconsidered", *English Studies* 24: 161-168.
- Wright, J. – E. M. Wright
1924 *An elementary historical New English grammar*. London: Oxford University Press.

APPENDIX

Earliest spellings with a narrow vowel (to c. 1400)

- c725** *Desisse, tiorade* [**c1050** in Wr.-Wülcker 385/9 *teorode*]. *Corpus Gloss.* (O.E.T.) 668.
- [c1200]** Vnwreste þu best 3ef þu wreche ne secst. 3ief mihte þe ne **atiered̄**.] *Trin.Coll. Hom.* 29.
- c1290** For-to honouri þis holi man þer cam folk i-nov3;..Of Eorles and of barones and manie kniztes heom to; Of seriaunz and of **squiers**. *Beket* 2427 in *S. Eng. Leg.* 176.
- 1297** R. Glouc. (Rolls) 7801 He let gadery is kniztes & is **squiers** al so.
- a1300** Do we wel and make a toure Wit **suire** [*v. rr. squire, squyre*] and scantilon sa euen, þat may reche heghur þan heuen. *Cursor M.* 2231; King ne knight, **suier** ne suain, O þam come neuer a fote again. 6279; þe **squier** hight abysai, þat to þe tent com wit dauī. 7717 Son þe tre was heun dun, And **squir** on- laid and scantliun, þe tre was als mete and quem, Als animan þar-to cuth deme. 8809.
- a1300** Ber wiþ þe **squire** and schautillun, Also þu were a gud Mascun. *Floris & Bl.* (Cambr. MS.) 326.
- 13..** Knyztez & **swyerez** comen doun þenne. *Gaw. & Gr. Knt.* 824 For-þy, sir, þis enquest I **require** yow here, þat 3e me telle with trawþe [etc.]. 1056.
- 13..** Þe rybaude pleieþ at þe **dys** [*ed. Weber, deys*] Swiþe selde þe fole is wys.*K. Alis.* (MS. Laud Misc. 622) 3297; Theo kyngis ost..amounted fyve hundred thousand Knyghtis., withowte pages and **skuyeris**. 6022.
- c1370** Capped **Friars**, that beene called Maisters of Divinitie. *Wyclif Agst. Begg. Friars* (1608) 30; **Fryars** suffren mightie men, fro yeare to yeare, live in avowtrie. 31.
- 1377** Iakke þe iogeloure..And danyel þe **dys**-playere. *Langl. P. Pl. B.* vi. 73.
- c1380** Þe blood of just Abel shal be **requyrid** of Cayn. *Wyclif Serm. Sel. Wks.* I. 336; *Wks* þei passen grete men in here gaye pellure..& tatrīd **squeyeres** & oþere meyne. (1880) 148.
- 1382** And Saul seyde to his **squyer**, Draw3e out thi swerd.
- 1382** in Riley *Mem. Lond.* (1868) 456 Walter Begood, **Squyer**.
- c1386** Whan that the cas **required** it, The commune profit koude she redresse. Chaucer *Clerk's T.* 374 Thou shalt me fynde as Iust as is a **squyre**. Chaucer *Sompn. T.* 382 Now stood the lordes **squier** at the bord, That carf his mete. *Sompn. T.* 535; Next the forseide cercle of

the A. b. c., vnder the cros-lyne, is Marked the skale, in Maner of 2 **Squyres** or elles in Manere of laddres. **c1391** *Astrol.* i. §121388 Les.jeues appelez coytes **dyces**, gettre de pere. *Act 12 Rich. II*, c. 6 §1.

- ?c1390** Take Funges [mushrooms], and pare hem clene, and **dyce** hem *Forme of Cury* in *Warner's Culin. Antiq.* 5; Take the noumbles of a calf, swyne, or of shepe, parboile hem, and skerne [? kerue] hem to **dyce**. 6.
- 1390** Al that I may **enquire** and seche Of such deceipte, I telle it al. *Gower Conf.* I. 176 These olde philosophres wise Of all this worldes erthe rounde, How large, how thicke was the grounde **Contrived** in thexperience. **1393** *Conf.* III. 90.
- a1400** A tretowre xal **countyrfe** his deth to fortyfye. *Cov. Myst.* (1841) 241
- a1400 50** All þe 3eris of oure 3outhe es 3are syne passid And we for-traualid & **terid** [*Dubl. MS. for-tyred*]. *Alexander* 1009; **Enquire** me nozt þat question, for I queth þe it neuer 1110.
- c1400** **No cause can I kyndely contryue** þat why he schulde lose þus his liffe *York Myst.* xxx. 434.
- c1400** **Though it were of no vounde stone Wrought with squyre** and scantilone. *Rom. Rose* 7064.
- c1400** [They] were gouernet by a gome,.. A fyne **squier** & a fuerse, -Eufemius he hight. *Destr. Troy* 6221.